

Building an Online Collaborative Learning Community of Pre-service Teachers of EFL

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Abstract The current study employed the qualitative approach and explored pre-service teachers' experiences through initial teacher education and perspectives on becoming an English-as-a-foreign-language teacher. In particular, it examined the influence of both participation in a community of practice and group discussions on their early professional development. An online journal forum was created where eight pre-service teachers from two universities recorded and shared their thoughts, difficulties, and challenges in their initial teacher education over two semesters. They also gave comments and feedbacks to one another online. Participation in an online collaborative community of practice enabled them to negotiate their membership in the community through shared inquiries across grades and beyond universities. While the membership negotiation of some members was still ongoing at the end of the project, others learned to become more responsible and full members in their own respective ways. Over the course of the study, the online community also became a space of safety and trust; a legitimate space for like-minded individuals was provided to discuss teaching and develop their expertise.

Keywords Pre-service Teachers' Professional Development, Community of Practice, Reflective Practice, Online Professional Development

root as one major approach for teachers' professional development. This is also the case in our context, Japan, especially in terms of the policy perspective; the core curriculum regarding the accreditation of the teacher certificate program at tertiary institutions by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT hereafter) [1] underscores its importance by suggesting reflection on one's teaching as an example of engagement in microteaching while teaching methods courses. However, from the practice perspective, few studies exist to date involving pre-service teacher reflection [2]. The scant research in this area may be attributed to common challenges associated with how pre-service teachers engage in reflection, such as their lack of teaching experience [3,4], their limited vocabulary in discussing teaching [5], and their lack of sophistication in terms of engaging in reflective discourse [6].

The benefits that student teachers gain from engaging in reflection, however, outweigh the challenges. Reflection is crucial for pre-service teachers in order to be liberated from what Lortie [7] described as the "apprenticeship of observation". Pre-service teachers' images of teachers derive primarily from thousands of hours of observation they have had as students in classrooms; moreover, they tend to hold idealistic images of teaching and teachers [2,8], which exerts considerable influence on their practice even when they become teachers [9]. Yet, their observations are restricted only to teachers' performance in the classroom and are devoid of other perspectives, such as teachers' preparation and planning outside the classroom [10]. In addition, teaching practice based on observation is often

1. Introduction

It is not too much to say that reflective practice has taken

unanalysed, and therefore becomes intuitive and imitative [7].

Reflection, thus, is crucial for pre-service teachers as it helps them connect the gap between the “imagined views and the realities of teaching” (Lee: 117) [11]. Also, through critiquing their own teaching practice, pre-service teachers can use reflection to enhance their beliefs [12] and professional identity [9,13]. Thus, the current study seeks to explore pre-service teachers’ professional development through the model of teachers as reflective practitioners.

2. Creating an Online Community of Practice for Pre-service Teachers

In addition to a reflective-practitioner model, the current study is also centred on a community approach that elucidates teachers’ development. The idea that learning communities can provide a venue for professional development among teachers originates from Vygotsky’s contention that “human cognition originates in and emerges out of participation in social activities” (Johnson & Golombek: 1) [14]. In line with this notion, the importance of social relations with others in the process of teachers’ professional development has been emphasised [15,16]. Creating a space and the means for their voices to be heard and shared is essential in the enhancement of professional abilities.

As Lave and Wenger [17] argue, any form of learning is a social process that takes place in dialogical interactions within communities of practice. In the learning community, newcomers gradually move toward fuller participation by interacting with more experienced members of the community; this process is called *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger: 35)[17]. Wenger [18] further argues that the essential aspects of a community of practice include *mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire*. Consequently, when teachers participate in a community of practice for teachers, their interactions with other teachers and peers are essential for professional expertise development [14]. Williams and Ritter [19] also emphasise that collaborative inquiries of practice will “increase social support, foster a culture of reflection and help avoid solipsism” (83). Thus reflection in collaborative groups facilitates pre-service teachers’ mutual learning via providing different possibilities and scenarios of their possible teaching selves and repertoires of teaching [13].

Furthermore, previous studies on professional development have shown that technology can provide a new type of space that facilitates collaborative learning and inquiry among teachers. An online community is defined by Conrad [20] as:

... a general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common

goal. The creation of community stimulates for online learners the comforts of home, providing a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals who are sharing a journey that includes similar activities, purposes and goals (2).

Hence, it is a space not only for interacting but also sharing common ideals or values and learning from one another. This also implies that community members need to be “contributors, not just observers and/or consumers of the group’s knowledge” (Lock: 4) [21]. As Lock [21] mentions, teachers often seek out peers to help facilitate their professional development, which has previously been achieved in face-to-face contexts, such as conferences and workshops. However, an online environment has the potential to facilitate teachers’ professional development not only from the local school region but also from different regions or even countries across the world. This is probably one of the reasons why online communities have recently been used more frequently than before in teachers’ professional development [22]. These communities function as a space for “a new innovation or knowledge pool,” given that the members of the community can share their knowledge with one another efficiently [23].

By providing a space for reflection, online communities also enhance professional development for pre-service teachers [9,24]. Boyd et al. [9] state that blogging used in teacher education programmes provides a space for “community building and trust formation” (43), as well as an opportunity for novice teachers to shape their professional identity. However, some drawbacks have been pointed out in online communities, such as difficulties that pre-service teachers might face in terms of their technology and IT skills [24]. Moreover, the success of collaborative reflection hinges on their attitudes toward and engagement with online learning [25]. For online communities to be a successful venue for professional development, Lock [21] points out that they must be carefully designed and well supported. Mumford and Dikilitas [25] further argue that a moderated and supportive style of learning is key for successful online communication. Many other researchers also agree that training, instructor intervention, and certain kinds of activities may determine whether the professional development of pre-service teachers is promoted or hindered in online communities of practice [9].

Despite the surge of interest in and practice of online communities for professional development, the roles of peripheral and full members involving pre-service teachers in such communities have hardly been researched to date. The current study seeks to focus particularly on building an online community of practice for pre-service teachers; furthermore, it explores how these teachers play their roles, contribute to their knowledge, and provide support through interactions with one another in becoming more responsible community members.

3. Method

3.1. Research Questions

The authors investigated pre-service teachers' experiences through initial teacher education (ITE) and their perspectives on becoming English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers. Moreover, the authors examined the pre-service teachers' development through an online journal community and group discussions. The main research question guiding this study was: How does a group of pre-service EFL teachers form a collaborative community as they reflect on their process of learning to teach?

3.2. Research Context and Participants

In Japan, to become a secondary-school EFL teacher, students are required to join an ITE programme at the undergraduate level. It usually begins upon matriculation, and students are expected to go through four years of coursework to develop a wide range of professional knowledge as well as teaching competencies. They typically enrol in methods courses in teaching EFL in their third year, in which they learn about the principles of language learning and teaching, designing and implementing lessons, and have chances to microteaching and brush up on their teaching skills. The school-based teaching practicum is usually practised in the fourth year, and its length is often limited to two to four weeks in many programmes. During the practicum, student teachers are assigned to work with supervising teachers; how they develop their professional expertise during the practicum is out of the reach of ITE teacher educators in many cases.

The case in the current study comprises eight participants (Eri, Joe, Kay, Jun, Ken, Mina, Ichiro, and Shohei: pseudonyms) from two ITE programmes in Japan (University A and University B). They were either third- or four-year English majors and were selected through purposeful sampling to gain maximum variation [26].

The participants were divided into two groups based on their grades, affiliations, and experiences in terms of their participation in the study (Table 1). Two issues should be noted regarding the group's makeup. One issue is that Jun, Ichiro, and Shohei joined the project in the academic year 2018 as third-year students, and this was their second year in the project. They also participated in their school-based teaching practicum in the academic year 2019. On the other hand, Joe, another fourth-year student, joined the project in the academic year 2019. He enrolled in the teacher certificate program one year after his cohort at the university; thus, he was going to experience his practicum in the school year 2020, at around the same time as Eri, Kay, Ken, and Mina. However, being in the same cohort, Joe and Jun had been friends before the onset of the study.

Table 1. Participants

Groups	Names	Grades	Universities	When they joined the study
1	Eri	3	A	May, 2019
	Joe	4	A	May, 2019
	Kay	3	B	May, 2019
	Jun	4	A	May, 2018
2	Ken	3	B	May, 2019
	Mina	3	A	May, 2019
	Ichiro	4	A	May, 2018
	Shohei	4	A	May, 2018

3.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Prior to the study discussed in this paper, a pilot study was conducted from May 2018 to January 2019 with five participants from University A and four participants from University B. For the main study, a combination of collaborative online journals and focus-group interviews was employed in the project over the period May 2019 and January 2020. Two shared online forums were formed by using Google Docs, with each forum having four participants, where they composed journal entries related to their ITE courses, teaching experiences, and professional development in ITE. In each group, the participants posted journal entries, read one another's entries, and made comments on them for two consecutive semesters. There were no particular rules in terms of the topics, frequency, number of posts, or the language, although all of them used Japanese, their native tongue.

The focus-group interviews took place three times: May 2019, September 2019, and January 2020. During each of the focus-group interviews, the participants freely discussed the journal content. At the end of the project, the participants were asked to write a final journal entry reflecting on their participation. Individual interviews were also conducted twice (September 2019 and February 2020) to ask them about their feelings concerning their participation in the former interview and their experiences regarding their professional growth over the year in the latter interview. All the data in Japanese were translated by the authors into English.

Data were collected from two primary sources: collaborative online journal entries and focus-group interviews involving the journal entries. The journal entries and interview transcript data were coded using grounded theory with a constant comparative method [27]. First, the two authors coded the data individually for emergent themes. Then, the authors discussed these themes and placed them into broader categories that represented the salient features of the participants' experiences. Data from the final individual interviews were also used to supplement the main findings. Finally, the data were

reviewed once more by considering the finalised themes and categories.

4. Findings

The members' participation in each group was analysed through the types of journal entries in the spring and autumn journals. There were two types of entries: the main entries and the comments. 'The main entries' refer to their main text entries, and 'the comments' refer to entries in the comment function on Google Docs.

In the pilot study [28], the authors analysed the types of journal entries and identified the following categories: 1. agreeing, 2. empathising, 3. asking/answering questions, 4. explaining, 5. showing interest, 6. offering advice/suggestions/possible solutions, 7 noticing, 8. sharing ideas/experiences, and 9. giving an opinion/expressing one's view. In the analysis of this paper, the same categories will be used. In addition, the authors identified new categories, such as "sharing challenges and asking for advice / suggestions," "accepting / confirming / acknowledging challenges," "encouraging," and "introducing/providing topics and information for discussion," all of which will be employed to discuss how the participants built a community of practice and developed their participation.

4.1. Changes in the Participation of Novice Members

The legitimate peripheral participation of the new members in journal writing might be expressed mainly through "asking for advice/suggestions," as doing so positions oneself as a member who seeks others with more expertise to give that member advice and suggestions. This positioning was enhanced especially when the new members wrote about some challenges they had confronted, followed by "asking for advice/ suggestions." This advice was often accompanied with "agreeing," "empathising," "giving advice/suggestions," "sharing ideas/experiences," and "giving an opinion/ expressing one's view." The comments from the other members consisted of accepting and acknowledging the new members' challenges, and the new members' challenges, and the new members were then acknowledged as legitimate peripheral members of the community.

Here, we describe the novice members' participation in the community using the types of comments described above. The development of the new members' participation is illustrated by contrasting the two groups, as well as by describing the participation of each member in their respective groups. What can be drawn from the data is that the new members in each group participated differently in the community. Joe, Eri, and Kay from Group 1 saw the community as a place of learning, and their participation can be described as legitimate peripheral participation from the onset of the study, and it seemed to

have remained the same throughout the study. On the other hand, Ken and Mina in Group 2 saw the community as a place where they could receive advice from their senior members, Shohei and Ichiro, whom Ken and Mina regarded as mentors or full members. Ken and Mina's participation developed from novice to legitimate peripheral participation, and later to full participation.

In Group 1, Eri, Joe, and Kay were novice members, and Jun was in the second year of participation in the study. In the group, Eri made the very first entry in the spring journal, where she shared her challenges and asked for advice ("sharing challenges" hereafter) about when to introduce a reading-aloud activity in a lesson (main entry, 24 May). All members provided advice/suggestions, shared ideas/experiences, and gave their opinions. Kay made the first response and expressed her view that there are two types of students. She offered a suggestion that Eri chose regarding when to do the reading-aloud activity based on the context she was teaching. Jun also responded to the Eri's entry and said he felt that doing the activity after going over the content would be better. Joe also made an entry, agreeing with Jun's comment.

It is interesting to note that Eri, a novice member, made the very first entry, and Kay, Jun, and Joe all gave their opinions in their first entries. Even though Eri commented on others' entries, after the entry about the reading-aloud activity, she only made one more main entry in the autumn journal, where she shared a challenge and asked for advice about how to teach textual content (29 October). Based on her entries, we could say that her membership remained the same: legitimate yet peripheral in the group.

Joe's participation in Group 1 also began as a legitimate peripheral participant from the onset and remained the same throughout the study. Joe was a novice member, but his position in the group was different from that of Eri and Kay, given that he was a fourth-year student and had been good friends with Jun. Joe's spring journal entries show that he did not introduce or provide topics and information for discussion. Rather, Joe commented on most of the entries by the others, and his comments were often preceded by agreeing, empathising, or showing interest. For instance, in response to Kay's sharing challenges and asking questions about writing a lesson plan (main entry, 17 June), Joe wrote, "Writing a lesson plan is challenging" and gave advice (main entry, 17 June). To Jun's advice about teaching a lesson with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) to teach lessons completely in English (main entry, 1 July), Joe responded by stating, "Good job, Jun. I teach all in English in my microteaching and would like to do so in my practicum." Joe empathised with Jun's practicum experiences and agreed with his idea (comment, 1 July). In the autumn journal, Joe shared challenges about how to respond to students' errors when teaching a lesson (main entry, 21 October). Also, Joe introduced a new topic regarding the importance of teaching listening after his experience of visiting Canada (main entry, 19 December).

As these examples illustrated, Joe's style of returning a comment preceded by agreeing, empathising, or showing interest might indicate his responsibility as a member in terms of embracing the other members' comments. However, his topic introduction and expression of his view were modest compared to Jun, which may demonstrate that his participation remained legitimate and peripheral throughout the study.

Kay, another novice, was the only member from University B. Kay's participation also followed a similar pattern to that of Eri and Joe, in which she started and ended as a legitimate peripheral member. Her entries show some patterns of a novice member: sharing challenges and asking for advice about an authentic activity with the use of the present perfect tense (main entry, 17 June) and sharing challenges concerning a new topic introduction in a lesson (main entry, 4 December). However, Kay was the first member to respond to Eri's entry about reading aloud, where she expressed her view and offered a suggestion. Also, in the spring journal, Kay introduced a topic about the announcement of MEXT in terms of addressing names in the order of the last name and first name (main entry, 2 June), which may indicate her participation as a legitimate peripheral member.

In Group 1, the novice members' entries seem to show that they participated in the community as legitimate peripheral members from the onset of the study and remained such until the end. The makeup of the group, where there was only one experienced member in the group, might have created a space where the new members felt more responsible for participating in journal writing. Also, the small number of entries compared to Group 2 show that the members did not have enough opportunities to develop their membership and were still negotiating their status in the group.

In Group 2, Ken and Mina (third-year students) were novice members, and Shohei and Ichiro (fourth-year students) were in the second year of the study. Their journal entries show that Ken and Mina's participation developed from novice to legitimate peripheral members, and more toward full members.

In Group 2, Ken was the only student from University B. In terms of "sharing challenges," Ken made two main entries (1 and 8 May) in spring and one main entry (16 November) in autumn. In terms of giving one's opinion, Ken offered his opinion and views in four main entries and four comments in spring, and seven main entries and six comments in autumn, which is more frequent than the novice members of Group 1. This does not mean, however, that Ken always expressed his opinions and views, particularly in his early entries in the spring semester. What prompted him (as well as Mina) to give an opinion seems to have been a provocative statement by Shohei (main entry, 24 June), where he suggested that English language teachers may not be needed in the future. His entry illustrated that the development of IT devices would lead to

a reexamination of education at school. After pointing out several benefits of online education, Shohei questioned the meaning regarding the existence of schoolteachers.

Shohei often expressed strong statements about his view of English language learning and teaching; however, unlike Ichiro (another fourth-year student), Ken and Mina did not usually join the discussion in their early entries. However, in response to Shohei's statement about the redundancy of teachers in near future, Mina (comment, 26 June) and Ken (comment, 24 June) expressed their opinions/views by stating that teachers are necessary, and they disagreed with Shohei's comment. Ken shared his opinion with quite a strong tone:

We need teachers! Teachers are necessary! Students grow up in school not only through subjects they learn but from the society that they are in. It is not too much to say that what made me who I am is being scolded by teachers and learning from it. Even if teachers will not teach subjects, the teaching profession should not vanish!

[Ken, comment, 24 June]

This was the first time that both Ken and Mina gave their opinions and views about entries made by the others. Following this instance, both Ken and Mina started to give their opinions more often in their journals. From the example above, it could be argued that prompts involving some controversial topics could be an impetus for novice members to express their views and opinions, as such prompts might provide legitimacy and an obligation for the novice (as well as the senior members) to express their views. Through expressing his opinions in the journal, Ken's participation changed from a novice member to a legitimate peripheral member, and then more toward a full member.

Mina, another new member in Group 2, was from University A. She wrote about challenges in her first three main entries in spring, and only one entry in autumn (10 December). The fewer entries of sharing challenges in the autumn journal imply that Mina's participation in the group was more aligned with being a full member in the group. This shift can be attributed to the comments written by the fourth-year students, Shohei and Ichiro, to Ken and Mina's entries in spring. That is, Shohei and Ichiro's comments showed that they accepted and acknowledged what the novice members wrote; moreover, these comments confirmed that what Ken and Mina were doing was legitimate and relevant.

To highlight such comments, Mina's second main entry (1 June) is illustrated as an example. In the second entry, Mina shared her challenge in terms of vocabulary teaching in her microteaching, and she asked for advice. She was planning to do her microteaching with the premise that the students had studied new words as homework. Then, while working on her lesson plan, she received a comment from her classmate that introducing new vocabulary in a lesson would be better. Mina asked in the journal if what she was

trying to do was meaningless. To her entry, Shohei responded:

If it is a lesson with many students, it might be a good idea to make the lesson “colourful” and balanced such as through showing the meaning of words in pictures on PowerPoint slides or making time for students to converse with the use of new vocabulary. If you are planning to give explanations on grammar, I do not think it is a problem to have students look up the meaning of vocabulary in advance.

[Shohei, comment, 8 June]

Shohei first gave specific advice to Mina in terms of having students study the new vocabulary. Then, he confirmed that what she was planning to do was not a problem. Another fourth-year student, Ichiro, also accepted Mina’s idea:

I do not think it is meaningless. How your friend wants to teach is also good. Choosing one of the ways depends on what you want the students to learn in 50 minutes. If you want the students to learn grammar or reading comprehension, sparing time for vocabulary introduction is not the best use of time, so I think having students look up the vocabulary beforehand would be better.

[Ichiro, comment, 1 June]

Ichiro first confirmed that what Mina was planning to do was not meaningless. He then expressed his view in terms of what needs to be kept in mind when teaching a lesson. Giving his reasons, he acknowledged that Mina’s approach would be better in this case. What can be noted from the Shohei and Ichiro’s comments is that, being senior members, they accepted and acknowledged what Mina wrote and confirmed that what she was planning to do was relevant.

Comments that accept, confirm, and acknowledge the challenges of new members may lead to the acknowledgment of novice members as legitimate peripheral members of the community. Such comments were written more by the senior members in Group 2. What is worthy of attention in both groups is that after being legitimised in the groups, one of the prominent developments observed in the comments of the legitimate peripheral members was giving an opinion/expressing one’s view, often followed by asking for an opinion from others. For example, Mina’s entries of giving her opinion became more frequent in the autumn journal.

Through the analysis of the entries, the authors noticed changes in the participation of the new members in Group 2, from legitimate peripheral members toward full participants. This was manifested in changes regarding the entry of sharing challenges, and in an increase in offering opinions and topic introductions between the spring and autumn journal entries. The makeup of Group 2 members with two senior members, and the role of their comments (which acknowledge and confirm the views and

experiences of the new members) might be one reason for the enhanced participation in the new members. In the entries of Group 1, on the other hand, there were more entries about sharing challenges and giving opinions in the autumn journal, meaning that the members’ interactions were more enhanced; however, these members were still negotiating their participation in the group.

4.2. Becoming a More Responsible Participant

It is also worth noting that for three of the participants, Ichiro, Jun and Shohei, the fact that it was their second year of participating in the project affected their roles in the community. They were full and more responsible members, given that the development of group membership is pertinent to their accumulated experiences and growing involvement in the community of practice. They (particularly Ichiro) learned to play the role of a mentor spontaneously by acknowledging and confirming other members’ opinions and comments more frequently.

In one of the journal entries, Ichiro reflected on his participation in the first year and reported that he noticed his role in the second year was different. In the first year, he learned through his senior students’ stories about their teaching practicum. This reflection implies that interactions with more experienced members enabled him to develop teacher expertise and play the role of a legitimate peripheral member; however, in the second year, due to his own experiences in the practicum, he became more competent and experienced. Moreover, by reflecting on what he was thinking and doing in the previous year, he gained a new understanding of his journey of becoming a teacher:

I was a third-year student last year, so I learned from the senior students’ practical experiences and often discussed them in the journal, but this year, I’m taking a senior-student role and gained a newer understanding through it. I reflected on what I was doing this time last year. To me, the school-based teaching practicum was such a valuable experience, so I made journal entries mainly on it.

[Ichiro, main entry, 24 July]

As Ichiro noticed his new role as a more experienced member, he not only learned from others but also started to provide the information that new members (Ken and Mina in Group 2) wanted to acknowledge that their ideas were good, and to make encouraging comments to them. He stated during the informal interview in September that this was what his senior students did for him in the first year; by doing the same for the new members in the second year, he believed he was able to “return the favour.” For example, first, Ken initiated a discussion with the topic of lesson introduction in one of the entries, saying that he needed to consider the four elements of “context,” “interaction,” “natural,” and “interesting” in the so-called CiNi approach. This was quite challenging for him, especially because he

was making a plan involving team teaching with an ALT. Then, Ichiro made the following comment:

First time to hear about the approach! I also struggled to introduce new learning elements naturally by only using already-taught elements during the practicum. As you mentioned, I believe many more things become possible through interaction with an ALT.

[Ichiro, comment, 15 October]

Here, Ichiro first empathised with Ken, saying that he experienced a similar challenge when introducing a new teaching point by using only already-taught points. Then, Ichiro agreed with Ken's idea and offered the possible solution that team teaching with an ALT will increase the potential for better teaching in such a situation.

The following excerpt also indicates that Ichiro played the role of a more experienced peer for Mina. In one of her journal entries, Mina expressed worry about lesson planning without having enough actual practical experiences. Then, Ichiro made the following comment:

As you mentioned, Mina, there are many things that you won't understand until you actually experience them. But you should face the challenge and make many new discoveries. I understand you are worried now, but you should give it a try in a way you think best. I'm sure you can gain something that you cannot get by only emulating others' teaching.

[Ichiro, comment, 15 October]

Ichiro first acknowledged Mina's anxiety and then encouraged her by saying that she should teach in her own way, and not with somebody else's way. Doing so would enable her to gain a new understanding about teaching.

Furthermore, Ichiro asked a follow-up question even to the other fourth-year student, Shohei, so that Shohei could give a more elaborate and explicit explanation and deepen his reflection on his own teaching practice. Shohei first wrote a journal entry, reflecting both on his teaching practicum and his microteaching in the methodology courses. Shohei said that he developed an awareness that, in fact, his microteaching would not promote students' active learning at all. Then, their written interaction continued as follows by using the comment function (both on 14 November):

Ichiro: Shohei, you did a great job. Can you tell us how your ideas on active learning differed between before and after the practicum?

Shohei: Before the practicum, I understood active learning means group work in which students discuss their ideas. But during the practicum, I realised active learning means interactive teaching between a teacher and students, which enables a teacher to elicit students' ideas and responses.

Here, Ichiro first acknowledged Shohei's hard work during the practicum and asked him to define the term *active learning* by comparing what he thought before and

after experiencing the teaching practicum. This enabled Shohei to reflect more deeply on his teaching and further develop his personal theory of what active learning is.

In regard to Ichiro's perspective shifting from being a legitimate peripheral participant to a more responsible and full participant in the group, Ichiro explained this change in his final interview:

As a senior student this year, I read the third-year students' entries, who haven't experienced their teaching practicum yet, and noticed I had similar challenges this time last year. They (=third-year students' entries) then made me reflect on my own entries last year again, ...and realised my entries last year perhaps worked as a reminder for the senior participants then. I remember I was thinking I wanted to learn from the senior members' experiences then.

[Ichiro, final interview]

I'm glad when others give me comments, ...and in regard to empathising, it's easier to accept comments if they give me an alternative, like, "It sounds like a good way, but how about this way?" than receiving advice in a one-sided manner. This is what I consciously thought about in giving comments. ... I took the liberty of giving advice as a senior student who experienced the teaching practicum, and this is probably why I made such comments. But I also learned a lot from the third-year students. ... If there are no comments (from other members), you cannot notice what's good and not good in your teaching, so I hope my comments enabled them to notice something about their teaching.

[Ichiro, final interview]

Ichiro's words indicate that by continuing to participate in a community of practice of pre-service teachers for two consecutive years, he was able to develop a stronger sense of sharing group membership. As a result, he became a more involved member in the community by taking on a mentor role for newer members.

In Group 1, on the other hand, Jun was the only fourth-year student who experienced the teaching practicum during the spring semester of 2019. His interactions with the newcomers in the second year into the project enabled him to reflect on his legitimate peripheral participation during the first year. At the same time, he became clearly conscious of his new role as a more experienced participant in the community of practice during the second year. He even mentioned that he sensed a greater responsibility for leading the group in the second year:

Senior students helped me a lot (in the first year), so (this year) I wanted to contribute by providing information, for example, about the practicum or the teacher recruitment exam. ...I thought I'm the one who should write a lot (in the journal) this year, ... and I wrote the entries so that (the new members) can learn something from my entries on the teaching practicum,

ALT and team teaching, and think before participating in their teaching practicum.

[Jun, final interview]

In one of the journal entries, for example, Jun wrote about his thoughts on the all-in-English teaching approach that he had experienced during his practicum. He actually planned to teach English lessons completely in English prior to the practicum; however, he soon gave up on this idea, as he realised that his supervising teacher and other teachers at the practicum school were teaching mostly in Japanese. The only time he was able to teach in English was when he team-taught with an ALT:

The only time I used English almost 100% was a class in which I team-taught (with an ALT). ...When an ALT explains in English, and if students cannot understand it, then a Japanese English teacher can put it in another way. This is how team teaching works. And I noticed that planning and making arrangements with an ALT beforehand are essential. ...By accumulating experience in team teaching, you will improve the way you use "English as a teacher." It depends on whether an ALT teaches full time or not at your practicum school, but if there is one, you should definitely tell your supervising teacher that you want to team teach (with an ALT). I'm sure it'll be a great benefit to you!

[Jun, main entry, 2 July]

As the excerpt above suggests, Jun often gave advice to his peers explicitly. Gaining more teaching experience, Jun became more assertive about his ideas and thoughts, both in the journal entries and during the group discussions during the autumn semester. Furthermore, Jun also consciously worked as a more experienced participant by presenting information and topics for discussion, such as university entrance exams and Google Translation, as well as asking for the group's opinions rather than only acknowledging what the others wrote and making comments about them.

The following excerpt from the final interview indicates that Jun believed he contributed a great deal to the development of the community by offering topics for discussion; doing this enabled the other newer members to develop professionally by thinking about and discussing these topics:

I wrote about issues, such as the teaching practicum, an ALT, and team teaching, so that they could think about them before their practicum. Also I wrote about an oral introduction that I learned in one of the ITE courses because I wanted to share it with one of the members from the other university. ... Through the comments I made and the issues I brought up, if they were able to think (more deeply), then that means I was able to contribute (to the development of the community).

[Jun, final interview]

Jun's case implies that in the first year, as a legitimate

peripheral member, he learned a great deal from reading the journal entries posted by more experienced peers. He then developed a stronger sense of membership and changed his role in the second year from being a peripheral to a full member who could introduce topics for discussion and share information based on his actual teaching experiences for the newer members in the group.

Shohei also changed his perspectives, particularly in the final semester, autumn in 2019, as he did his teaching practicum in September of that year. As he explained in the final interview, in the first year of his participation, he purposefully used the online journal to express his thoughts about English language teaching rather than learning through interactions with and from the other members. He often made lengthy entries, and even when he received some comments, he usually did not write a response back to them. In a way, he was in his own world, reflecting on his ideas about English language teaching in a unilateral way. However, going into the second year of the project, soon after Shohei came back from the teaching practicum, he started to make comments more frequently, sometimes agreeing and empathising. For example, Ichiro discussed how pair-work and group-work activities could be successfully used within the language classroom as a main entry. He explained that teachers should set a good example first and become a model for their students to speak English confidently. Then, Shohei made a comment by agreeing with Ichiro first and telling a story about his own high school teacher:

I agree with you. I remember my high-school English teacher who did not have native-like pronunciation. When I saw him speak with an ALT calmly and confidently, it made me think that I wanted to become like him, not necessarily fluent but being able to communicate in English confidently.

[Shohei, comment, 1 November]

In another instance, when Mina wrote about her volunteer experience in high school and reflected on how teachers could create a positive (or less positive) classroom atmosphere, Shohei first acknowledged her entry, and then, reflecting on what he had learned during his practicum, he made some comments in terms of creating a good learning environment:

A teacher who teaches well sure knows the points [to create a positive classroom atmosphere]. What I learned during the practicum was that students concentrate on learning if a teacher can clarify what they are supposed to do for each passing moment. If you tell them, like, "OK, look at the blackboard," "Write down what I write on the blackboard to your notebook," or "Close your textbook and look at the handout," and then, they will follow you smoothly, especially in the case of junior-high school students, and I believe this leads to a lively classroom.

[Shohei, comment, 17 November]

At the end of the project, Shohei reflected on the past two years and acknowledged that, through growing involvement in the community of practice, he was also able to learn from the junior members during the second year:

I participated in the journal writing project for two years, and I think my perspectives toward foreign language education have changed. Learning about what the third-year students noticed during their microteaching and their worries were beneficial for me, too because I was able to reaffirm what could be problematic for a [novice] teacher. [Shohei, final journal entry]

He also mentioned in the final interview that in the second year, he purposely tried to make comments about his peers' thoughts, even when he already knew the ideas, believing that doing so would result in the development of stronger commenting skills:

Writing and sharing ideas with others [in the online journal] has a big meaning for each member, so even when the ideas were not new to me, I commented very consciously because developing strong commenting skills is essential for my future career as a teacher, and I should develop the skill now so as to be able to respond to various ideas from my future students. I also enjoyed reading comments from other members on my entries. I was happy that they read my entries. ...It was interesting to learn that there was a gap between my intention as a writer and the readers' interpretations of my meaning.

[Shohei, final interview]

The excerpt above illustrates that Shohei came to believe that showing interest and reacting to others explicitly are essential qualities of being a good language teacher. By realising the gap between his intention and others' interpretations, he also learned to reflect on his expertise more objectively and see it from a higher perspective. Further, he commented that he hoped his ideas and thoughts were meaningful for his peers and their professional development, which was in fact the main purpose of the current project—building a collaborative learning community of student teachers:

Also, what I could contribute [to the community] was that what I wrote actually inspired the other participants to a certain degree. ... I hope at least they became aware and remembered that there were some student teachers with different ideas from them.

[Shohei, final interview]

5. Co-construction of the Meanings of the Community for Pre-service Teachers

One of the unique aspects of the current study is the makeup of the group members; that is, the group comprised student teachers from different ITE programs, namely from

University A and University B. The participating student teachers highly evaluated such a group construction, as it gave them alternative perspectives and insights on English language teaching beyond ITE courses across grades and universities. Kay, for instance, described the community as “another university.” She stated in the second focus-group interview (FGI) and the final interview that prior to participation, she was feeling unsatisfied with the fact that she belonged to a rather small community of one university without enough chances to share ideas with her classmates. The community of the current project became a place for her to learn alternative possibilities and scenarios of possible teaching selves [13]. The other participants stated the same opinion as Kay on this point in their final interviews (Eri and Mina, third-year student teachers, and Jun, fourth-year student teacher, from University A). This can also be observed in the third FGI of Group 2:

Shohei: When I read journal entries, I noticed (Ken was) doing different things (in the Methods courses at University B) from us.

Ken: I thought so, too.

Ichiro: Was it (= being the only person from University B) difficult for you?

Ken: Not really.

Mina: We take different courses (from Ken) and learn different things, right? And much of what Ken wrote (in the journal) was new to me, so, what should I say, it was great that we, from different universities, could exchange ideas.

[Group 2, 3rd FGI, 24 January]

In addition, in the final interview, Ken pointed out again that because he did not know the members in his group, he felt comfortable sharing his views. These examples imply that combining the groups from different universities was conducive for some members to learn and express themselves.

However, the findings suggest that combining the group members from different grades (that is, students from the third and fourth years) seemed to provide a more meaningful learning opportunity for both members. The mixture was meaningful, as the experiences of the third- and fourth-year students were different. The third-year students (especially Ken and Mina in Group 2) relied on the fourth-year students, given that they were more experienced in doing the microteaching and had participated in the practicum. Kay stated in the second FGI and in the final interview that she learned from Jun, the fourth-year student, about his actual experiences during the teaching practicum, which was particularly valuable for her because of his authentic voice. In the case of Ken, he took further steps to say that it became sort of a pseudo-experience for him. In his case, not only did he value the social validation process by reading the fourth-year students' opinions and perspectives, and checking whether what he thought was off track or not; he also believed that “listening to seniors' experiences is as if

they were my own experiences” (Ken, final interview).

As was discussed in Section 4.2, the roles of the fourth-year students (Jun, Ichiro, and Shohei) shifted with their negotiation in the groups, their participation in the practicum, and their experience in the study itself. Being asked for advice from the third-year students about microteaching might have positioned the fourth-year students as those with more expertise in teaching. The teaching practicum (which engaged them in teaching in authentic settings and in sharing collaborative inquiries with the group members) seemed to have given them confidence and shifted their membership in the group as being more responsible and contributing participants. In addition, being second-year participants also seemed to mediate their membership. In the first year of the project, they learned from their senior members through reading their journal entries. This experience of being third-year students in the project allowed them to understand the needs of the novice members. Learning from the senior members in the group was passed down to another grade, as seen in the comments by Ichiro and Mina. Ichiro wanted to interact with the third-year students just as his fourth-year students had done to him in the first year of the study. Mina said in the final interview that if given a chance to participate the following year, she wanted to teach junior members what she gained from the senior members.

In addition to the community gaining significance as a place to learn alternative perspectives and insights from other members from different programmes and grades, the "space" of a reflective and collaborative community has provided other meanings to the pre-service teachers. First, to engage in the reflective and collaborative community of practice, the participants used the space to put their thoughts into words and develop their expertise. The space was not only intended for acquiring new perspectives and experiences from others, but also for activating their implicit knowledge and beliefs that they had already possessed, verbalising them and co-constructing their new meanings together. For example, Joe stated in the final interview that participating in the group was a good impetus for him to do research personally in advance for the sake of writing an online journal entry, in which he said he would not have done spontaneously if such participation had been assigned as a course requirement. Similarly, Eri stated in the final interview that she began to think more deeply about her beliefs in teaching; as a result, she could express her thoughts clearly in writing. She also stated that she felt writing in the journal aided her to develop clearer and more logical thinking. The following excerpt of the third FGI of Group 2 also indicates a similar point:

Shohei: Sharing ideas with the other members and organising my thoughts in writing helped me prepare for the teacher recruitment exam, which was very helpful.

Interviewer: How about you, Mina?

Mina: I'm not the type who writes out my thoughts

usually. ...but it was good that we had a chance for reflection and to put our thoughts into writing. ...

Ichiro: As Shohei also said, when you verbalise your thoughts and tell them to others, you need to think about which words to use and how to construct texts in writing so that it becomes easy for them to understand my meanings, and this experience was very valuable for me because I need to think about this point when I become a teacher.

[Group 2, 3rd FGI, 24 January]

Secondly, what was most noteworthy about the collaborative community was, in line with Conrad's contention [20], it became a safe and secure space for the participants so that they could feel comfortable about engaging in deep discussion. All of the participants stated that they usually did not have many chances to express their thoughts or share their ideas about teaching with their classmates in the ITE program at each university. Ken said in the final interview that he felt awkward about having discussions with his own classmates on teaching expertise; when they did so, it usually remained very superficial because they were his friends. Ken found the gap between him being a university student and him being a teacher, and sharing his thoughts as a teacher with his friends was embarrassing. In contrast, he felt comfortable about revealing his ideas and transmitting his thoughts to the group members; they were members of a reflective and collaborative community working closely together toward the same goal.

Ken's view seems to indicate that being acquainted with the other members in the collaborative community is not necessary in terms of sharing and expressing one's views. Rather, a close acquaintanceship might inhibit such expression, as the exposure may leave the members feeling rather awkward or embarrassed. In fact, this may account for the ongoing negotiation of the membership in Group 1, possibly between Jun and Joe. Their closeness was manifested in the focus-group discussions on topics they chose to discuss and the language they used to communicate with each other. Their close friendship, however, did not necessarily mean that they engaged in discussions about teaching outside of the project. In the first FGI, Joe elaborated on his high-school English language teacher, who motivated him to pursue teaching as his profession. After the description of the teacher, he said, "He was a graduate of University A, and that's why I entered this university. He has given me a big influence." Joe added that he had never really had a chance to talk about his teacher before. Being a member of the group gave him an opportunity to discuss his experiences and ideas about teaching. At the same time, the collaborative community might have obliged Joe and Jun to construct a different style of discourse with which they were still negotiating.

Eri was another participant who appreciated being a

member of the group with others having similar interests. She stated that her classmates were enrolled in the ITE program to obtain teacher qualification, but they did not necessarily want to become a teacher. In the final interview, she described the meaning of participating in the group as follows:

For me, being in this group comforts me. I felt satisfied. I was very happy with the opportunity to be able to talk to other students who want to be teachers. I was relieved. As I do not have a chance to talk to this type of student, I am worried thinking if what I am doing is ok, but being a part of this group relieved my worries.

[Eri, final interview]

As Eri rightly put it, many pre-service teachers in Japan have concerns about their future; they are not sure how they can prepare themselves for their future career as a professional teacher, and how they can share their struggles with other student teachers in ITE. Thus, Eri stated, “I feel secure in this group because I gained additional access to deeper and more fulfilling discussion”; furthermore, what the other members were saying was credible and reliable to her, as Eri believed that they were serious about becoming a teacher and sharing the same goal. This is in fact in line with Conrad’s [20] conceptualization of the online community of practice, which provides members with “a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals who are sharing a journey that includes similar activities, purposes and goals” (2).

6. Conclusions

This article reports the results of a project involving eight pre-service teachers collaboratively reflecting on their process of learning to teach English. As suggested by Lave and Wenger [17] and subsequent research, these pre-service teachers negotiated their membership in the community of practice through shared inquiries across grades and beyond programmes. While the membership negotiation of some (particularly the novice members) was still ongoing, others learned to become more responsible and full members in their own respective ways. Over the course of the study, the online community also became a space of safety and trust, as well as a legitimate space for like-minded individuals to discuss teaching and develop expertise. A further area worthy of research would be the development of student teachers when they move into the actual workplace, and whether they autonomously build their own community of practice and collaboratively work on professional development within and across their workplaces. It would also be interesting to investigate whether online interactions (in contrast to face-to-face interactions) offer a different avenue to enhance teachers’ professional development.

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